

1999

Introduction

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My Muse

Across the room, an empty chair I spy,
But with an unseen presence filled. It seems
A stranger, yet reveals an ancient friend.

I'd recognize those features any time:
The massive Gascon head, encased by ears
As spacious as his heart; a nose as bold
As faith; and eyes whose eighty years
Had not yet banked their fires. Indeed, it is
A visage beaming out the strength and force
Within.

No stranger, he. In fact,
He is The Host — my muse and mentor — I the guest.
"You sit," he welcomes me and bids me share
A sip of vintage wine and chew once more
A bite of wholesome, peasant bread, the same
That fed his frame its zeal for spending self
Those many years.

"You see me now," he mused,
A vision, Jesus' ancient servant, blessed
With years aplenty. Blessing, true, but length
Of days, I've found, holds small importance; less
Indeed than any shorter span if lived
Devoid of loving, deep intent. For me
The course of years was ample, daily touched
By grace and steered through paths surprising, marked
With Jesus' steps in which to trod and which
I followed, steadied in the Father's will.

"So. See me wrinkled, shy of strength, but soul
Unwilted, heart afire. The heart's the last
To go, I've heard it said. Let all come near,
Then, catch the burn, to warm anew a world
Grown cool to love and numb to Jesus' word."

The voice subsides, the presence melts away.
The musing silenced, now the charge goes out
To friends to voice anew on his behalf
The words and music lodged within his soul.

January, 1992



Introduction



This collection is a series of informal essays about Saint Vincent de Paul, his life and his spirituality, that I started writing over nine years ago when I became editor of *Midwest*, the Vincentian Provincial Newsletter. The title of the columns was *Vincent's Corner*.

They were not planned as a series but as random pieces that the moment inspired. However, a misperception of my intention turned them into a regular series. I wrote the first essay with the intention of doing others from time to time, and for that reason I borrowed the rubric that the editors of the *New York Times* use for certain pieces, "An occasional column." For some reason this direction got lost in the transition to the published copy, and after the first appearance, some readers got the impression that this would be a regular feature. Fortunately, they encouraged its continuance out of appreciation. In recent years that encouragement has extended to inviting me to collect them into a single volume for publication.

Other than for topics suggested by a season, or a special occasion associated with Vincent's life, the essays were not composed in any logical sequence, but only as a subject suggested itself. For the present purposes, however, they are classified in some loosely thematic order. In addition to the grouping of occasional pieces, one series deals with the qualities or the achievements that defined the saint's life and person; another with his relationships with contemporary persons whose lives touched his; and finally, with elaborations on the virtues that Vincent practiced and promoted as significant for his followers. All of the essays are rooted in the saint's words and life.

My aim in composing these pieces was to extract some essential themes, thoughts, and insights from the voluminous collection of Vincent's utterances — from the more than 2,500 letters (the remnant of an estimated 25,000) and the abundant number of conferences, never written personally, but transcribed by his auditors.

What I have done in composing each piece was to take related passages plucked from different locations among these utterances, stitch them together into some pattern, and inject some leavening where called for. Vincent himself might ask of one or another passage, "Did I say that? I didn't write any books, you know, and so others have preserved my letters and other words. I trust that my scribes accurately reported me." As my own reassurance to the saint, I would say that I have treated his recorded words kindly. My chosen method gave me latitude in ranging among his many utterances, but fairness held me to using them honestly, that is, without falsifying his thought, distorting it, or treating the words out of context.

My audience is anyone interested in the Vincentian vision of things, whether members of Vincent's religious communities or others doing works in his spirit — in other words, anyone within the Vincentian Family, as the group has come to be called. After the example of Jesus, who, Vincent always noted, "began by doing...[and integrating] fully into his life every kind of virtue," most of Vincent's disciples are already engaged in doing the works of charity. The saint's words here, then, are not a call to action. Rather, they are offered as reflections for deepening one's personal understanding of the saint's charism.

Except for obvious, needed corrections, or for other adjustments adapted to this context, the essays stand without any revisions. They are *Vincent's Corner*. To make any substantive additions or subtractions would be to offer something different. Although each essay was conceived as a self-contained piece about some facet of Vincent's life and thought, there will inevitably be some overlapping. I trust that these echoes would serve to reinforce the impressions made.

Thanks to Ms. Betty Tutor, who worked with me throughout the years of composition and publication of the Newsletter, and who was a great help in establishing its high quality during that time. My thanks, too, to Ms. Ann George, who was an invaluable aide in preparing the text for the printer. As I found out, it is not enough to have worthwhile things to say: the format and the presentation are also important factors. Finally, my thanks go to my confreres and to other readers who encouraged the permanent preservation of these essays. If there is anything I would hope from the publication of these essays, it is that Vincent de Paul's service to the poor become even better known and more widely imitated.

Jack Melito, C.M.

25 January 1998

Foundational Feast of the Congregation of the Mission